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ABSTRACT

Bibliotherapy, a humanistic approach to teaching, has been shown to make teachers more sensitive to the needs of children and to produce marked improvement in children's reading achievement. Books used for bibliotherapy (not for lessons or assignments) can provide children with reading that gives them greater insight into themselves, other people, the world in which they live, and the forces operating in this world. (Several children's books appropriate for bibliotherapy are described.) (JM)

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HUMANISTIC APPROACH TO TEACHING:
A LOOK AT BIBLIOTHERAPY

by

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Bibliotherapy is defined by Josette Frank as "Reading that gives children greater insight into themselves and helps them grow in appreciation of other people, in understanding the world they live in and the forces which operate to make people think, feel, and behave as they do." (1:33) There are many other definitions of bibliotherapy, but this one seems most appropriate for the topic under discussion at this time.

Reading That Gives Children Greater Insight Into Themselves

Everyone has a self-image or self-concept. "The individual unconsciously builds his concept to reflect the love, kindness, and empathy--or the lack of these things--shown by his parents or other important people in his life." (2:34) Applegate found that the greater the degree of wholesome experience, the more adequate the self-concept. (2:32)

Many children who gaze into the mirror of life find the self-image blurred and distorted. The cause may be parental and home influence. The story is told of a little boy helping his teacher fix the blind above the window. He climbed up to reach it, the teacher took his arm, exhorting him to be careful lest he fall. He said, "I'm all right, teacher. My father always tells me that if I fall, to be sure I fall on my head because I'm so dumb it will never hurt me. My brothers are always telling me I am so dumb, too. One of my brothers says that if I wasn't so dumb, I wouldn't have to stay in after school or during recess to study my reading." (3:34)

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Children's problems may have their roots in home environment, or they may stem from appearance, handicaps, lack of friends, economic status and broken or unhappy homes. Extremes can be very painful: the child suffers who feels he is too small or too tall, too fat or too thin, too weak, or too clumsy or awkward.

Applegate feels that teachers have the opportunity "to implant a seed of encouragement that can give the child a feeling of worth." The teacher might be the only person in a child's life to make him feel that "he is important, a person of value, a person who has fulfilled his innate God-given thrust for growth, for self realization." (2:32)

How can the teacher help a child to see himself in a better light? What technique can he use? One way is through BIBLIOTHERAPY, or story book guidance. The therapeutic value of right book for right child at right time must be recognized. The child can find emotional release as he identifies with a character with same or similar problems. He learns, as Smith indicates, that his problems are not unique. (4:93)

Probably everyone has at least one book that helped him gain insight into himself at a time when he needed it. (5:328) For some it may be the Bible, for another a story of fiction, or perhaps biography of some great person who had many conflicts in life. To the writer one book read in childhood stands out as a beacon: Porter's Pollyanna. Even today when something seems to go wrong, when there are disappointments, she finds herself seeking and searching for that "something to be glad about." A silver lining always casts a bright gleam through that dark cloud, as she recalls Pollyanna's father telling the little girl who was so sad when in the poor box she found, not the doll she longed for,

but only a pair of little crutches: "You can be glad, Pollyanna, that you don't have to use them."

Books can be introduced to children in many ways. Before a teacher can sell a book to children, she must be sold on it herself. As Larrick states, "A book comes alive when it is in the hands of an interested reader." (6:17) Reading any part of the book that arouses curiousity, that stirs the children to want more, is one of the best ways to introduce a book. If the teacher is delighted with the book, it will show in the way she reads it, the interest and sympathy in her voice, the delight in her eyes. When interest is astir, all one has to do is to make the book available.

Panel discussions by two or three or more children who have read a book or several books in the same category will not only interest others but will help them feel with characters in the stories. Mattera, who used group bibliotherapy each week, reported that statements of individual children showed that discussions helped them solve personal problems; further, students showed greater interest in reading; lastly, their techniques of discussion of books showed improvement. (7) Carlson describes benefit of these discussions as "the delight and sense of involvement, the sparkle of the child's eye as he reads or shares his favorite book." (8:25)

Some books which may help children teased by their classmates, who do not feel they belong to the group, are the following:

THE NEW BOY, by Urmstrom, in which the children admit how they, too, have at times experienced that empty feeling in the stomach, mouth dry, a lump in the throat that won't let them swallow.

MILLIONS OF CATS, by Gag, in which the child who feels she is not

pretty, who feels inferior, will find comfort as she reads about the homely, lonely cat, who managed to find love and security for herself. When the old man and old woman did not know which of the millions of cats to keep and decided to let the cats make the final judgment on which was the prettiest, what a battle followed! Screaming, scratching, clawing! When things finally settled, there was nothing left--only one cat, who, knowing she wasn't the prettiest, kept quiet, so no one bothered her.

BREAK FOR THE BASKET, by Christopher, depicts the shy boy who, when he must recite before the group, can't seem to make the answer come out, or when he is on the playground lets balls fall through his fingers. Fear grips his heart, and he begins to withdraw from the group. If only each child who suffers thus would find someone who understands his feelings, who would help him build up faith within himself as the strange man did for Emmett.

HUNDRED DRESSES, by Estes, in which Peggy and her satellite taunt poor Wanda who, having no mother to help her, comes to school poorly dressed. Those who have been quiet when they might have been a friend to a child who had to bear such treatment will identify with Mattie who wished she had courage to speak up at the right time.

DORP DEAD, by Cunningham, involves the reader with a lonely boy and his inner turmoil concerning the meaning of security and conformity.

THE LONER, by Wier, portrays a defiant child who feels he can get along without anyone. "I don't need help from anyone," he tells himself. Later, he recalls those who showed that they loved and cared about him, who helped him see himself as a person of worth: Raidy, the first person who bothered to care for him and whom he saw die before his very eyes

just when she was to give him a name; Tex, who taught him how to stop being a loner and to throw in his lot with people, not just himself; Angie, who believed in him and helped him believe in himself; Boss, who had given him a home and shown him what loyalty means.

RED HEAD, by Eager, with its rhyme is delightful reading. Those little boys and girls who have been teased about their red hair will smile as they identify with Fritz. How he detested everybody calling out, "Hi, Red!"

Fritz didn't like it; his name was Fritz,
And he blamed his hair, 'cause the fault was its.

. . . . . .

And he got so angry, he told his father,
He wished he were BALD, he'd really rather.

Arbuthnot stresses that these books need to have themes built around the need to achieve and the need both to be loved and to bestow love, so very vital at every age to a child's dream of himself as a "competent and accepted person." (9:5)

Reading That Helps Children Grow in Appreciation of Other People

"Every individual," according to Anderson, "in his personal contacts, those immediate person-to-person situations, must find a certain amount of satisfaction and comfort. In order that this may be possible, he must develop skills in those relationships." (5:428) Among those relationships one would include the following:

1. Ability to recognize needs and rights of others;
2. Ability to control one's feelings and to predict consequences of one's actions;

3. Ability to read "cues" to others' feelings;
4. Ability to practice necessary social amenities;
5. Ability to help others verbally and through actions without arousing sentiment. (5:429)

It is significantly important that books mirror differences in ways of living, underlying causes of these differences, especially emphasizing that "people are people wherever they live. They have problems and try to solve them; they have joys, sorrows, and frustrations; they have family relationships and social duties. No matter what the dictates of their culture, they are human beings," explains Peller. (8:24)

Lois Lenski faces children in a very open way that they can comprehend. Her characters show warmth and respect that people need to have for one another. It is as if she gets "inside" the places and people about whom she is writing. She leaves them with things to think about and stretches their ideas and feelings about life and living.

FOLLOW MY LEADER, by Garfield, helps children not only feel with Jimmy in his blindness, but face the reality of forgiving those who wrong others, intentionally or unintentionally. They learn to understand conflicts of the wrong-doer, the cause of his behavior.

JUST THE RIGHT SIZE, by King, helps each child to understand that each grows and develops at different rates, that although he may be smaller or larger than others, he is the right size for now. He begins to realize that the world is made up of many people, all sizes, different races, different religions, different in many ways, yet so much alike.

Huck and Young explain that children may gain insight into their own

actions and their own growth and behavior by identifying with individuals or families in good literature. (10:267) Gast adds that "children's literature can be an effective means of transmitting values and attitudes about minorities and their relationships with Americans." This he calls "culture therapy." (11:664)

Beim, who wrote the SMALLEST BOY IN THE CLASS, points out that he wrote the book, not for that smallest boy, but for his classmates, to help them help him to overcome his difficulties. (6:316) Franks agrees that the special value of such books often lies in sharpening perception and deepening understanding in children who themselves are not in similar situations, but whose friends or classmates might be. (6:316)

Reading That Helps Them Grow in Understanding the World They Live in and the Forces Which Operate to Make People Think, Feel and Behave as They Do

Literature presents values; it teaches sensitivity; it conveys mature concepts of friendship, loneliness, and death. Tiedt lists the following understandings that children may gain from literature:

1. Everybody has problems.
2. Problems are to be solved.
3. Appearance may be deceiving.
4. People are not all good or all bad.
5. People are much the same all over the world. (12:193)

Children sense the beauty and the terror of loneliness as man seeks to survive against such forces as a roaring ocean, raging wind, or unknown monsters of the sea. THE BIG WAVE, by Buck, as it describes the boiling ocean rushing toward the shore as a huge monster, destroying all

and everything in its path, will help children understand the destruction experienced by those whose homes were destroyed by tornadoes or earthquakes. They will feel empathy for Jiya, who sees his whole family, home and village destroyed, who must face life alone, truly alone.

The writer has compiled a list of over 500 books that would be suitable for bibliotherapy (14) These are arranged in different categories, with the grade level for each book indicated. This list does not contain all the books appropriate for guidance but will serve as a guide for those who are interested in trying this technique. Does bibliotherapy work? In evaluating an experiment that he conducted over a six-month period, Burger noted that teachers became more sensitive to needs of children, and also that there was marked improvement in reading achievement of children. (13) The writer found the same results in an experiment she conducted.

To the child who makes so many mistakes growing up, it seems adults never make any and they keep telling children what to do and what not to do. Therefore, stories in which adults appear in ridiculous positions are good therapy; they relieve emotions of the child who feels threatened by the adult world. Bibliotherapy is one way to help meet the needs of the child. Among these needs is security, a place the child can call home. In BLUE WILLOW the blue willow plate is the symbol of the settled home that Janey felt would surely come some day. The triumph of Agba in KING OF THE WIND, by Henry, shows that physical handicaps can be overcome, that even the boy who is mute can feel he is a person of worth.

When books are used for bibliotherapy, reading should not be connected in any way with lessons or assignments. If a child wants to share his book, that is his pleasure; however, never should he be made to reveal

his inmost feelings. They are his private privilege. What a difference there will be when schools and teachers are satisfying rather than creating a need for the child to read! The use of BIBLIOTHERAPY is, indeed, such a humanistic approach to teaching.

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